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FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1081
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000089

SIPDIS

NSC FOR PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 6/25/2019

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR PREL PTER TH

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: POSSIBLE RESUMPTION OF SECRET DIALOGUE
STILL CHURNING IN PLACE

REF: A. BANGKOK 1508 (RESPONSIBILITY FOR JUNE 8 MOSQUE ATTACK)
1B. CHIANG MAI 58 (INSURGENT LEADERS PRESS AHEAD)
1C. 08 CHIANG MAI 120 (IMPLEMENTATION STALLED)
1D. 08 CHIANG MAI 177 (DEMISE OF SECRET PEACE DIALOGUE)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, CG, ConGen, Chiang Mai.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary and Comment

11. (S) Mark Tamthai, former RTG point-man for secret talks with southern insurgents, sees a potential silver lining in the recent surge in violence in southern Thailand following the June 8 mosque killings and subsequent reprisals. He told CG June 24 that the uptick in violence and the military's indirect implication in the mosque attack have given PM Abhisit the upper hand over hardliners who oppose a political resolution to the insurgency. Tamthai believes public sentiment is growing that the military-led approach is a dead end. This gives Abhisit a window of opportunity to show his government's sincerity about reconciliation via steps such as releasing an imprisoned Muslim elder and implementing a pilot peace zone plan in Yala city. Tamthai himself will return to talks next week with exile insurgent leaders, though not as an RTG representative.

12. (S) Comment: If recent developments in the South have indeed given PM Abhisit a tactical advantage over hardliners in his government, the flip side is that hardliners among the insurgents likely have the upper hand over moderates for the same reasons. It is modestly encouraging that Tamthai is re-engaging in talks with the insurgents (presumably with Abhisit's blessing). However, real implementation of conciliatory steps like those outlined above continues to face stiff resistance by hardliners on both sides. End Summary and Comment.

Surge in Violence Gives PM Upper Hand over Hardliners?

¶13. (S) CG met June 24 in Chiang Mai with Mark Tamthai, Director of Payap University's Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace and former RTG point-man for secret talks with southern insurgents. Tamthai referred to the recent surge in violence and reprisals since the late May Tak Bai post mortem inquest ruling, most notably the June 8 mosque killings reportedly perpetrated by volunteer paramilitaries linked to a military figure close to the royal family (Ref A). Tamthai asserted a silver lining in this cloud of new violence: it has given Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva the "upper hand" over hardliners who continue to oppose a political approach to resolving the southern insurgency. The PM's new confidence and resolve that his inclination for a political solution must go forward, Tamthai said, was one reason why he spoke publicly on June 14 in favor of creating a special administrative zone for the three southernmost provinces.

¶14. (S) Although the usual naysayers (military/security hardliners, the Democrat Party's old guard, and those who call for enshrining Buddhism in the Constitution as the national religion) were quick to skewer PM Abhisit's proposal, Tamthai said the plan has growing support. He claimed the Thai public increasingly sees the current military-led approach as unworkable, and asserted that even most senior military commanders in the South consider it a dead end. The mosque killings, and subsequent brutal reprisals by insurgents, have reinforced this sentiment (and we note a June 24 Bangkok Post opinion piece calling on the RTG to "change course" away from "hopeless" military means and toward a political solution).

¶15. (S) Moreover, Tamthai said, the implication of links between
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the mosque attack and current and retired Royal Thai Army (RTA) personnel has put the RTA and other hardliners on the defensive, Tamthai said, encouraging PM Abhisit to push ahead with a political approach. At the same time, however, Tamthai admitted that the mosque incident has angered the ethnic Malay Muslim insurgents, and given hardliners among them the upper hand over those favoring political reconciliation. The insurgents are having an easy time now attracting new recruits, he added.

Window for Action

¶16. (S) Tamthai outlined fairly modest goals for what PM Abhisit might be able to accomplish with this current tactical advantage over hardliners. Limiting factors include the ongoing struggle between "establishment" forces and those loyal to ousted former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, and uncertainties about the staying power of Abhisit's multi-party governing coalition. Against this background and with a potentially short-lived window of opportunity, Tamthai said he is urging Abhisit to act now to re-establish the RTG's sincerity about the peace process by:

-- releasing from prison a local Muslim leader known as Baba Betong (as heard), a well known, elderly religious figure who has been imprisoned for some 10 years. Tamthai claims Abhisit favors this move as a goodwill gesture.

-- implement a well-developed but long-shelved pilot "peace zone" in Yala city (Ref C).

Tamthai Back at the Table, But Not on RTG's Dime

¶7. (S) Tamthai reported that, for the first time in months, he himself will again be involved in direct talks with exiled insurgent leaders - at a meeting next week at a yet-to-be-disclosed location. This will be his first direct contact with the insurgents since the demise of the RTG-insurgent secret dialogue last year (Ref D). The meeting is being organized and facilitated by the Henri Dunant Centre, which in recent months has brokered periodic meetings among the insurgents to develop a reconciliation proposal that could serve as the basis for resuming direct talks with the RTG.

¶8. (S) While Tamthai's participation has the blessing of PM Abhisit, he is not attending as an RTG representative. His travel, in fact, is being paid for by the Henri Dunant Centre, since Tamthai's own budget disappeared with last year's official demise of the secret dialogue. Tamthai expressed discomfort with this arrangement, but recognized he is boxed in by Abhisit's June 14 public vow that his government would not negotiate with the insurgents. The most Tamthai is hoping for is that Abhisit would eventually resurrect Tamthai's old team with a "mandate" (and budget) for resuming "dialogue" - but not "negotiation" - with the insurgents.

¶9. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
MORROW